

Epidemics and Religion: From Angry Gods and Offended Ancestors to Hungry Ghosts and Hostile Demons

Louise Marshall,
University of Sydney

Abstract: *Throughout history, religious beliefs have been a primary way of understanding the experience of epidemic disease. This article offers a pan-historical and cross-cultural analysis of such interactions. The first section examines common structures and assumptions of religious explanatory models. These are characteristically two-fold, nominating both supernatural causal agents and particular human actions that have set these forces in motion. A society's identification of the behaviors that would prompt the infliction of mass suffering and death upon an entire people reveals a great deal about the values and world view of that culture. Most revolve around definitions of the sacred, which could be polluted, profaned or neglected by deliberate or inadvertent actions, and acceptable standards of moral behavior. Defensive strategies vary according to the nature of the supernatural agency held responsible, from one or more angry gods to offended ancestors, hungry ghosts or hostile demons. The final section investigates the extent to which religion may be helpful or harmful in shaping responses to epidemics, including the present global pandemic of Covid-19.*

Keywords: Religion, Epidemics, Plague, Covid-19, Pandemic

Throughout history, religious beliefs have been a primary way of understanding the experience of epidemic diseases. Religion is here defined as cultural practices and beliefs that have as their goal relationship and communication between human beings and those (usually) unseen spiritual entities or forces that are believed to affect their lives.¹ As anthropologists have noted, the dominant motif of a religion—its fundamental characteristics—is often revealed in the ways in which it explains misfortune and sickness and by the steps recommended to avert these.² Classifying such

¹ Westerlund, *African Indigenous Religions*, 2, quoting Brenner, “Histories of Religion in Africa,” 164.

² Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 313; Westerlund, *African Indigenous Religions*, 4.

beliefs as “primitive” or “civilized” according to the degree to which they approach or diverge from some external, imposed ideal (whether monotheism or modern scientific medicine) is less useful than recognizing the extent to which all religions offered a way of making sense of common human experiences of danger, suffering and disease.

In the case of epidemics, religious beliefs are forged in the furnace of catastrophic mass disease and high mortality, affecting not just one or two unfortunates but large numbers of sufferers at the same time. For many societies, this represents a qualitatively different situation from individual experience of sickness and health, generating different explanations and responses.³ Because epidemics affect entire communities at a time, prescribed actions are usually public and collective, rather than private and individual, since the goal is to end the epidemic and restore health for the entire group.

Religion may offer more than one possible reading of events and may be integrated within or co-exist alongside other, more empirically inflected ideas of epidemic disease causation and cure. Ancient Assyria, for example, is known for its extensive medical corpus of naturalistic therapies, but Assyrian scholarly healers were also exorcists and priests who performed propitiatory rituals to soothe the angered gods and made no distinction between natural and supernatural causes of disease.⁴ Similarly, religious and naturalistic interpretations and practices co-exist in Indian Ayurvedic medicine, Confucian China, medieval Islam, early modern Europe, and in many societies today.⁵ Religion is thus not necessarily monolithic as an explanatory model, nor exclusive of others. Most often, people will find explanations that work for their particular set of imperatives. Being conscious of such diversity and pluralism of understandings allows us to recognize the robust creativity and resilience of human responses to epidemic disease across time and space.

The following discussion is not exhaustive, but aims to chart some of the principal ways in which religion has interacted with epidemic disease. The first section looks at common structures and key assumptions of religious explanatory models. The categories of heavenly beings held responsible are analyzed in turn. Since averting strategies only make sense in terms of the set of beliefs within which they were conceived, they will be discussed alongside

³ For a stimulating analysis of epidemics as ‘dramaturgic’ events, see Rosenberg, “What is an Epidemic?,” 1–17.

⁴ Heeßel, “The Hands of the Gods,” 120–30.

⁵ Selin and Shapiro, *Medicine across Cultures*; Watts, *Disease and Medicine in World History*.

each other. The concluding section looks at how religion has influenced human behavior in the face of epidemics, both positively and negatively.

Understanding Causes: A Two-Fold Model

The most important role that religion played in relation to epidemics was explaining what was happening in terms that made sense to that particular culture. Usually, such explanations were two-pronged, looking upwards to the supernatural realm and outwards (or perhaps better, inwards) to contemporary society. Epidemics were usually identified as let loose upon the world by supernatural forces: one or many gods, demons, or spirits of the dead. In most cases, these heavenly beings were not seen as acting randomly, but as responding to particular human actions that offended them. A society's identification of the behaviors that would prompt the infliction of mass suffering and death upon an entire people reveals a great deal about the values and world view of that culture. These vary considerably, but usually revolve around definitions of the sacred—which could be polluted, profaned, or neglected by deliberate or inadvertent actions—and of acceptable standards of moral behavior within the community.

For all cultures, explaining epidemic disease is less focused on addressing the disease symptoms of individual sufferers and much more about the cosmic disorder which such bodies show forth. Epidemic disease represents the world out of joint, a disastrous upset of the expected cosmic harmony. Religion aims to identify the causes, redress the problem, and restore good relations between heaven and earth. To do this, many drew on specially designated human intermediaries. These men and women—priests, chanters, oracles, diviners, seers, prophets, soothsayers, exorcists, and other specialists—were recognized as being gifted with special skills and status that enabled them to clarify the wishes of the supernatural powers and identify the human failings responsible. From them, too, would often come specific recommendations for remedial devotional and ritual action.

Divine Agency and Divine Cure

When epidemics are viewed as divine punishments for human error, the gods who send the disaster are also those who will lift it, if correctly approached. In heavenly pantheons, as in monotheism, the gods are inherently dualistic, both benevolent and punitive, the source of the scourge and the means

of deliverance. In ancient Sumer, the underworld god Nergal was a benefactor of humanity and protector of kings, as well as a fearsome warrior god who unleashes war, pestilence and devastation upon the land.⁶ His destructive powers are enthusiastically celebrated in a hymn in his honor from the second millennium BC,

Lord of the Underworld, who acts swiftly in everything, whose terrifying anger smites the wicked, Nergal, single-handed crusher, who tortures the disobedient, fearsome terror of the Land, respected lord and hero...Nergal, you pour their blood down the wadis like rain. You afflict all the wicked peoples with woe, and deprive all of them of their lives.⁷

Such hymns were part of placatory rituals designed to mollify the angry gods and restore their good humour by heaping up their praises.⁸

This dualism is not unique to ancient Mesopotamia. Apollo of Greek mythology was the god of learning and the arts, as well as the death-dealing archer shooting plague arrows upon those who offended him. Yoruba divinities supervise all aspects of human existence, but punish with misfortune, disease, and epidemics.⁹ The most feared is Shopona, powerful as a whirlwind, who attacks by sending smallpox, insanity, and other crippling diseases.¹⁰ Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and monotheistic African religions, like those of the Nuer and the Masai, all recognized the supreme creator God as both author of their devastation and source of their liberation.¹¹ In India, Sitala has been venerated since the sixteenth century as the goddess of smallpox.¹² The heat of her anger causes the disease when she possesses the body, but if she is appeased and cooled by human propitiation, she will leave and the sufferer will recover. Today she is the major village deity in Bengal and elsewhere, annually celebrated as “the mother” of the village, who takes away the fear of smallpox.

⁶ Often described by scholars as the god of inflicted death: Wiggermann, “Nergal,” 215–26.

⁷ Black et al., trans., *The Literature of Ancient Sumer*, 160.

⁸ Cunningham, *Deliver Me from Evil*.

⁹ Westerlund, *African Indigenous Religions*, 121–48.

¹⁰ Westerlund, *African Indigenous Religions*, 128–31.

¹¹ Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 311–22; Westerlund, *African Indigenous Religions*, 65–83.

¹² Nicholas, “The Goddess Sitala,” 21–44; Arnold, “Smallpox and Colonial Medicine,” 45–65; Arnold, *Colonizing the Body*.

Arguing Your Case Before an Angry God: The Plague Prayers of King Mursili

Some of the earliest and most vivid examples of prayers composed to request divine aid against an epidemic come from ancient Anatolia (the Asian part of modern Turkey), from the reign of the Hittite king Mursili II (ruled c. 1321–1295 BC).¹³ Faced with a devastating twenty-year pestilence, the king appeals to the gods through the intermediary of a priest reciting the prayer, “O, Storm-god of Hatti, my lord! [O gods], my lords! Mursili, your servant, has sent me, saying: ‘Go speak to the Storm-god of Hatti and to the gods, my lords.’” The prayer continues with a dramatic evocation of unending death, reproaching the gods for their harshness—even, one might say, for their irresponsibility—in allowing the plague to last so long.

What is this that you have done? You have allowed a plague into Hatti, so that Hatti has been very badly oppressed by the plague. People kept dying in the time of my father, in the time of my brother, and since I have become priest of the gods, they keep on dying in my time.

The king comes to the gods as an urgent petitioner, seeking answers to a terrible situation, “Will the plague never be removed from Hatti? I cannot control the worry of my heart, I can no longer control the anguish of my soul.”¹⁴

Like a defendant in a law case, Mursili uses every means he can to present his case favorably to the gods gathered in judgement.¹⁵ He stresses his piety and devotion to the temples of all the gods, and his many attempts to ask them to lift the plague are so far unsuccessful.

When I celebrated the festivals, I busied myself for all the gods. I did not pick out any single temple. I have repeatedly pled to all the gods concerning

¹³ At least eight prayers are known, addressed to various gods individually and collectively, that have been recognized by scholars as “among the most beautiful compositions in Hittite literature.” See Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 47–69, and 48, with an excellent exposition of the genre in the Introduction, 1–18. I have chosen to concentrate on the longest and most famous of the group by virtue of its exemplarity and its highly dramatic and lyrical language: Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 57–61.

¹⁴ Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 57.

¹⁵ For Hittite prayers as the enactment of a case in a divine court, with the king as defendant, the offended god as prosecutor, the addressed god as advocate [these roles combined in this plague prayer], and the court of justice the assembly of the gods, see Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 5ff.

the plague, and I have repeatedly made vows [to them], saying: ‘Listen [to me O gods], my [lords, and send away] the plague from Hatti.’¹⁶

The king further points out that the epidemic is against the gods’ own self-interest, since so many have died that there is no-one left alive to honour them.¹⁷

In the divine court, the accused must admit guilt. Consultation of oracles has revealed that Mursili’s father angered the storm god by breaking a treaty oath (sworn on the gods) and failing to maintain certain rites. Though himself blameless, Mursili accepts that punishment of his father’s sin has fallen on him. Moreover, since the king is the priestly representative of his people before the gods, royal offences implicate the whole society in their punishment.

O Storm-god of Hatti, my lord! O gods, my lords! So it happens that people always sin. My father sinned as well and he transgressed the word of the Storm-god of Hatti, my lord. But I did not sin in any way. Nevertheless, it happens that the father’s sin comes upon his son, and so the sin of my father came upon me too. I have just confessed it to the Storm-god of Hatti, my lord, and to the gods, my lords. It is so. We have done it. But because I have confessed the sin of my father, may the soul of the Storm-god of Hatti, my lord, and of the gods, my lords, be appeased again. May you again have pity on me, and send the plague away from Hatti.¹⁸

Confession disarms the angry judges, who are further appeased with the offering of gifts in the form of sacrifices and libations. The identified offences are rectified—the king repairs the broken oath and promises to restore the neglected rites.

¹⁶ Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 58.

¹⁷ This reproach is included in other plague prayers by Mursili, most eloquently in that to the Sun-goddess of Arinna: “No one prepares for you the offering bread and libation anymore. The plowmen who used to work the fallow fields of the gods have died, so they do not work or reap the fields of the gods. The grinding women who used to make the offering breads for the gods have died, so they do not make the god’s offering bread any longer. The cowherds and shepherds of the corrals and sheepfolds from which they used to select the sacrificial cattle and sheep are dead, so that the corrals and sheepfolds are neglected. So, it has come to pass that the offering bread, the libations, and the offering of animals have stopped” (Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 49–54, at 52).

¹⁸ Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 59–60. For a stimulating comparative analysis of such cultural assumptions across Hittite, Israelite, and Greek texts, see Hanson, “When the King Crosses the Line,” 11–25.

Finally, Mursili reminds the gods to be merciful, like a good patron with an erring dependent.

[I say] to you [as follows]: The bird takes refuge in the cage, and the cage preserves its life. Or if something bothers some servant, and he makes a plea to his lord, his lord listens to him, [has pity] on him, and he sets right what was bothering him. Or if some servant has committed a sin, but he confesses the sin before his lord, his lord may do with him whatever he wishes; but, since he has confessed his sin before his lord, his lord's soul is appeased, and the lord will not call that servant to account...I am now continuing to plead to the Storm-god of Hatti, my lord. Save my life! And if perhaps people have been dying for this reason, then during the time that I set it right, let there be no more deaths among those makers of offering bread and libation pourers to the gods who are still left...O Storm-god of Hatti, my lord, save my life, and may the plague be removed from Hatti.¹⁹

As this prayer forcefully spells out, gods and humans exist in a hierarchical but reciprocal relationship, which imposes responsibilities on each party: the king to admit faults and rectify offences, the gods to be compassionate and receptive to pleas for help. The king has fulfilled his side of the bargain, and it is now time for the gods to do theirs.

Heavenly Book-keeping

Heavenly pantheons are envisaged in terms that make sense to a particular society. In China, from the twelfth century CE, the influence of Confucian ideals led to a belief in a hierarchically organised celestial bureaucracy, with a Ministry of Epidemics presided over by five powerful deities, the Commissioners of Epidemics.²⁰ These divine bureaucrats drew up heavenly balance sheets of good and evil deeds for every person on earth, rewarding meritorious acts with health and sending disease when the balance tipped too far towards the negative. Epidemics occurred when the score sheets of an entire community were so unfavorable as to be judged beyond saving. Like bureaucrats everywhere, the Commissioners themselves stayed in their offices and sent their assistants to earth to carry out their commands. A host of

¹⁹ Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 60.

²⁰ Benedict, *Bubonic Plague in Nineteenth-Century China*, 100–30.

plague gods (*wenshen*) acted as their emissaries, carrying out annual inspections of morals and inflicting epidemics on those deserving of punishment.

As the active causative agents, it is the *wenshen* who receive cultic veneration. Images of the plague gods were set up to receive homage and worship, and festivals in their honor were held around the time when they were believed to be making their annual tours of inspection, to persuade them to return to heaven without marking the community down in their black books. Similar festivals were also held when an epidemic broke out. Prayers and ceremonies of cleansing and purification culminated in a procession to drive out demons (who could be enlisted by the plague gods) and see the gods on their way. The gods' departure was visibly enacted by placing images of the *wenshen* on boats made of paper or grass that were then floated away or burnt.

What Makes the Gods Angry?

Crimes that stir up the gods vary according to cultural priorities. In the plays of the Greek poet Sophocles (496–406 BC), Oedipus' murder of his father, the king, and his marriage with his mother, though unwitting, polluted the land in the sight of the gods and cried out for vengeance (*Oedipus Tyrannus*). Only the suicide of the queen and Oedipus' own blood offering (he blinds himself) and banishment could begin to wipe the stain clean. Disrespect or profanation of a divinity's cult were equally fatal. In Homer's *Iliad* (1:1–475), Apollo inflicts an epidemic on the Greek army after their king, Agamemnon, captures the daughter of the priest of Apollo and refuses to ransom her back to her father. Yoruba deities were angered not by moral shortcomings, but by failure to properly maintain their cult, including neglect, disrespect, and breaking taboos.²¹ Hindu and Buddhist ideas of reincarnation and inherited karma raised the possibility that epidemics could be heaven-sent punishments for unrighteousness or misdeeds in a previous life.²²

Judaic understanding of the causes of epidemics was determined by Israel's sense of mission as God's chosen people.²³ Directed against Israel's enemies, pestilence was an aspect of God's unique sovereignty, his unlimited power over all creation, and his ability to trump the gods of any other faiths. Yet Yaweh could also turn this fearful weapon upon his own people. This was the burden, as well as the promise, of the covenant between nation and God, a

²¹ Westerlund, *African Indigenous Religions*, 139.

²² Zysk, "Does Ancient Indian Medicine Have a Theory of Contagion?," 87–89.

²³ Baruch, "The Relation between Sin and Disease," 295–302; Kee, *Medicine, Miracle and Magic in New Testament Times*, 12–16.

mutual agreement that promised divine favor and protection on condition that Israel faithfully obeys the divine commandments. The polarities of judgement and deliverance, destruction and sustenance, are thus central to the relationship between God and his people, “I will kill and I will make to live, I will strike, and I will heal, and there is none that can deliver out of my hand” (Deut. 32:39–41). The only hope is repentance of sin and cleaving once more to God, for he has promised compassion after judgement, rewards after suffering, the renewal of divine favor, and blessing upon a chastised and penitent nation.

This concept of a God, at once merciful and severe, who punishes his people for their own good, is also a central feature of Christian and Islamic understandings of epidemic disease. When plague broke out in the mid-third century CE, Christianity was a minority religion in a hostile Roman world. According to bishops Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258) and Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–c. 340), although the epidemic appeared to strike down pagan and Christian indiscriminately, the purposes and end results for each were very different.²⁴ For the enemies of Christ, the plague was a justly deserved punishment that led to eternal torment. But for Christians, the plague should be welcomed as a way of testing one’s faith and making sure you followed Christ’s injunctions to care for the poor and the sick. Christians who died were called to paradise and eternal rest, and those who died caring for others were equal to the martyrs in the way they testified to the faith at the cost of their own lives. Thus, a paradoxical interpretation of hope and mercy was wrested from a seemingly calamitous situation. Early Islamic teachers similarly viewed epidemic disease as differentially freighted according to belief: for infidels, plague was a punishment and a disaster, but for faithful Muslims, it was a mercy and a reward, a martyrdom sent by God that led directly to paradise.²⁵

When Christianity became the state religion of the Roman empire, this kind of dialectic explanatory model was less appropriate. Instead, like the Israelites, Christians recognized God was punishing them for their sins, chastising them into better behavior. Hence the pronouncement of pope St Gregory the Great (c. 540–604) in a sermon preached in Rome during a plague in 590 CE: “May our sorrows open to us the way of conversion: may this punishment which we endure soften the hardness of our hearts.”²⁶ Interior repentance and conversion of morals had to be proven by collective rituals performed under the divine gaze by a united and reformed community, “so that

²⁴ Cyprian, *Thasci Caecili Cypriani De Mortalitate*; Scourfield, “The *De Mortalitate* of Cyprian,” 12–41; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 21–22, 121–26, 220–23.

²⁵ Dols, *The Black Death*, 13, 21–25, 109–21.

²⁶ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 426–28.

when he seeth how we chastise ourselves for our sins, the stern Judge may himself acquit us from the sentence of damnation prepared for us.” Islamic authorities also at times interpreted plague as divine castigation of sins, such as adultery, prostitution, usury, or drinking alcohol, with a consequently greater emphasis on the reformation of morals, as well as individual prayer and collective processions.²⁷

Spirits of the Dead: Community Beyond the Grave

As agents of epidemic disease, the ancestor spirits of certain African religions share many characteristics with the gods: they watch over the living and expect to be honored with correct cultic veneration. Like the gods, they are both agents of affliction and sources of healing.²⁸ They are angered by neglect of their rites, breaches of taboo, and flouting of acceptable behavior. Like the relatives they once were, they can be difficult, exacting, and demanding, holding grudges until they are properly propitiated. Kongo *nikisi* spirits, the oldest and most powerful of a hierarchically ranked series of ancestor spirits, are each associated with a particular disease.²⁹ Epidemics are caused by Mayimbi spirits, particularly potent *nikisi* who belong to a family of “smashers.”³⁰ Severe epidemics are the work of male Mayimbi, while less serious outbreaks are attributed to female Mayimbi spirits. These spirits must be invoked and propitiated by sacrifices, to appease their anger and give them the honor and respect they require.

Ancestor spirits may also be more constrained than gods by close-knit ties of kinship joining the living and the dead in community, with their sphere of abilities limited to their own living relatives. In societies with strong traditions of sacred kingship, even if disrupted or abolished by colonial rule, such as the Sukuma and the Kongo, only the spirits of deceased chiefs can cause an epidemic afflicting many families at once.³¹ During their life, chiefs were religious representatives of the entire territory, responsible for the correct performance of rituals maintaining the health of the community, and this power continues after death.

²⁷ Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East*, 114–15, 119–21, 236–54.

²⁸ Westerlund, *African Indigenous Religions*, 85–120.

²⁹ Westerlund, *African Indigenous Religions*, 109–11.

³⁰ Westerlund, *African Indigenous Religions*, 114.

³¹ Westerlund, *African Indigenous Religions*, 93–94, 107.

Elsewhere, relations between the living and the dead are more fraught, as in the Chinese belief in hostile or hungry ghosts, vengeful spirits of the unquiet dead who had suffered premature or violent deaths.³² Their bodies unclaimed, their rites neglected, they cannot return home, but roam the countryside, searching for victims. Alone, they inflict disease on individuals, but joined together in packs, they are even more dangerous, capable of causing epidemics. These spirits are the polar opposites of African ancestor spirits. Unconstrained by family ties, they represent an uncontrollable, potentially lethal supernatural force, defining these particular dead as more demonic than human.

Hostile Demons and How to Get Rid of Them

As supernatural agents of epidemic disease, gods and ancestors share the essential quality of moral duality: they might punish, but they will also heal. Humans enter into cultic relations with them as a way of keeping the lines of communication open so that disagreements can be resolved and harmony restored. But demons are another matter, fundamentally malevolent and chaotic. Different strategies are therefore required. Whereas gods and ancestors are praised and petitioned, demons are exorcised, battled, and even tricked. In Vedic India (c. 1700–800 BC) and China from at least the sixteenth century BC, all diseases, including epidemics, were thought to be caused by demons who attacked the body from outside and possessed it.³³ A Chinese dictionary from the second century CE defined epidemics as *corvée* (*yī*), in the sense of a harsh and inescapable impost or servitude, clarifying that “it refers to the *corvée* exacted by demons.”³⁴ With incantations and prayers, Vedic and Chinese healers engaged in a ritual battle to expel demons from the body. Subsequently, in China, belief in the demonic origins of epidemics existed alongside or was combined with the heavenly bureaucracy discussed above. Demons might act on their own, but more often they were thought to be under the control of the *wenshen*, or plague gods.³⁵

Demons sometimes appear in Christian belief as secondary supernatural agents of the plague.³⁶ Jinn armed with piercing lances occupy a

³² Benedict, *Bubonic Plague in Nineteenth-Century China*, 110–12.

³³ Zysk, *Asceticism and Healing*, 3–20; Zysk, “Ancient Indian Medicine,” 79–96; Kuriyama, “Epidemics, Weather and Contagion,” 3–22.

³⁴ Kuriyama, “Epidemics, Weather and Contagion,” 3.

³⁵ Benedict, *Bubonic Plague in Nineteenth-Century China*, 110.

³⁶ Marshall, “God’s Executioners,” 177–99.

similar place in some Islamic accounts of the Black Death and later epidemics.³⁷ However, if demons or jinn are allowed to harry humanity with epidemic disease, it is only because God has given them permission to do so. The evil spirits act not in their own right, but as part of the divine plan. Sometimes demons co-operate with angels in imposing punishment on sinful humanity.³⁸ Nevertheless, such a withdrawal of active divine agency from the task of chastising sinners leaves open the possibility for others, such as saints and holy people, to wrest control from the demons and provide protection from the plague.³⁹

Heavenly Helpers

In addition to the supernatural beings who cause the plague, many religions provide for additional heavenly helpers. Bhaisajyaguru, the “medicine” Buddha, dispenses a range of healing benefits, including protection against epidemics.⁴⁰ Until the threat of smallpox declined in the modern era, several Shinto deities in Japan were petitioned for protection against it and other epidemics.⁴¹ Both the Christian belief in a triune godhead and the cult of the saints offered many possibilities for playing one heavenly power against another.⁴² Before an angry God the Father, Christians could appeal for relief to Christ the merciful Son. If Christ is enraged, then one might invoke his mother, the Virgin Mary, who is known to be especially forgiving of sinners and enjoys a mother’s privilege in overriding or deflecting her son’s destructive impulses. As the special friends of God, the saints were also well placed to intercede with the deity, acting as impassioned advocates before the throne of the divine judge.

³⁷ Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East*, 115–18.

³⁸ Marshall, “God’s Executioners”; Marshall, “The Collaboration from Hell,” 19–45.

³⁹ St. Sebastian’s intervention against the plague was first solicited against an epidemic spread by a demon and an angel working in concert; see Marshall, “The Collaboration from Hell.” For Renaissance depictions of St. Nicholas of Tolentino wresting plague arrows from demons to save the city of Pisa, see Marshall, “La costruzione di un santo contro la peste: il caso di Nicola da Tolentino,” 103–13. On the Virgin Mary as (selective) protector against demonically-launched plague attacks, see Marshall, “Manipulating the Sacred,” 506–16 and fig. 12.

⁴⁰ Birnbaum, *The Healing Buddha*; Suzuki, *Medicine Master Buddha*.

⁴¹ Ohnuki-Tierney, “Healing and Medicine,” 3867–70.

⁴² Marshall, “Manipulating the Sacred,” 485–532; Marshall, “Plague Literature and Art,” 522–30; Marshall, “Affected Bodies and Bodily Affect,” 73–106. For the invention of the new plague saint Roch, both healer and victim of bubonic plague, see Marshall, “A New Plague Saint for Renaissance Italy,” 543–49; Marshall, “A Plague Saint for Venice,” 153–88; and Marshall, “St Roch and the Angel in Renaissance Art,” 165–211.

Whether name saints, local patrons or specialist healing and plague saints, they could be relied upon to respond to their worshippers' appeal.

Conclusion: Religion as Help and Hindrance

By providing an explanation of events judged meaningful and satisfactory by a particular society, and indicating concrete solutions believed to avert or change events, religion offers believers a way of making sense of the world, and thereby, perhaps, gaining some measure of control over it. During epidemics, religion often functions as a significant coping strategy. Such positive psychological effects have sometimes been insufficiently taken into account when historians have considered the psychological effects of past epidemics upon any given society.⁴³

Many religions emphasize care of the sick as part of their work in the world, and have contributed significantly to the creation of institutions and personnel providing much-needed nursing and medical care for victims of epidemic disease.⁴⁴ In some instances, such as the practice of variolation as a part of the worship of the smallpox goddess Sitala in India, or the emphasis on cleansing and ritual purity, religious beliefs can have demonstrable positive therapeutic effects.⁴⁵ Conversely, religious rituals involving the coming together of many worshippers at a time, such as processions and pilgrimages, often facilitate the spread of epidemic disease.⁴⁶ In early modern Europe, clergy and believers who were convinced of the need to propitiate divine anger with penitential processions and keep churches open to all comers came into conflict with health boards and secular authorities determined to ban public gatherings and close churches to prevent widespread infection.⁴⁷ Similar scenarios featuring some religious leaders and communities unwilling to follow government-mandated health measures against infection have also played out

⁴³ As argued in relation to the Black Death and the second plague pandemic by Marshall, "Manipulating the Sacred." For this point in general, cf. Dein et al., "COVID-19, Mental Health and Religion," 4.

⁴⁴ Amundsen, *Medicine, Society and Faith*; Selin and Shapiro, *Medicine Across Cultures*; Zysk, *Asceticism and Healing*; Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East*, 176–78; Crawshaw, *Plague Hospitals*; Cipolla, *Faith, Reason and the Plague*.

⁴⁵ Nicholas, "The Goddess Sitala," 27–29; Arnold, "Smallpox and Colonial Medicine," 50–51; Benedict, *Bubonic Plague in Nineteenth-Century China*, 120.

⁴⁶ For nineteenth-century India, see Nicholas, "The Goddess Sitala," 34–36.

⁴⁷ Palmer, "The Church, Leprosy and Plague," 95–99; Cipolla, *Faith, Reason and the Plague*; Slack, "Responses to Plague in Early Modern Europe," 443–45.

during the present global pandemic of COVID-19.⁴⁸ For the most part, however, faiths world-wide have adapted to the current emergency by moving religious services and devotional activities online, and have assisted in the delivery of urgently-needed community health and social services.⁴⁹ Yet, as the decision to drastically curtail but not cancel the 2020 hajj to Mecca indicates, navigating between the imperatives of religious belief and public health during a global pandemic remains a challenging task.⁵⁰

Along with conquering armies, missionaries can be the cause of spreading epidemic diseases to previously unexposed populations they are attempting to convert. All too often, the resulting catastrophic mortality of Indigenous peoples in waves of epidemic diseases was seen by the conquering Europeans as divine judgement on the savage heathens.⁵¹ This use of religious beliefs to justify stigmatization and persecution of minorities and outsiders — Jews, women, the poor, the lower classes, foreigners, racial minorities, practitioners of other religions, homosexuals, and queer people outside traditionally-defined gender or sexual norms—of whom the dominant group does not approve is the most troubling element of the encounter of religion and epidemics.⁵² As the recent history of the AIDS epidemic demonstrated, such toxic conjunctions are not confined to the distant past.⁵³ Religiously-justified blaming and discrimination against stigmatized groups has occurred around the

⁴⁸ Wilson, “The Rightwing Christian Preachers”; Wildman et al., “Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic,” 115–17; Dein et al., “Covid-19, Mental Health and Religion,” 1–9; Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs, “Culture Wars and COVID-19 Conduct,” 405–16.

⁴⁹ Wildman et al., “Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic,” 116; Dein et al., “Covid-19, Mental Health and Religion,” 3–5; Marshall, “What Religion Can Offer.”

⁵⁰ The pilgrimage was restricted to residents of Saudi Arabia, with 10,000 expected to take part: “Coronavirus: Scaled Back Hajj Pilgrimage Begins;” “Muslims Begin Down-sized Hajj Pilgrimage.”

⁵¹ Bray, *Armies of Pestilence*, 129; Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism*, 195–216; Chaplin, *Subject Matter*; Arnold, “Introduction: Disease, Medicine and Empire,” 1–26; Watts, *Disease and Medicine*, 15–37.

⁵² Nelkin and Gilman, “Placing Blame for Devastating Disease,” 362–78; Rosenberg, “What is an Epidemic?,” 5–9. For attacks on Jewish communities in Northern Europe in response to the advent of bubonic plague in 1348, see Ziegler, *The Black Death*, 87–98. For blaming and shaming across the confessional divide in the early modern era, see Slack, “Responses to Plague in Early Modern Europe,” 436–39, 446–49. For nineteenth-century England and America, see Bray, *Armies of Pestilence*, 177, 183–84; Hays, *The Burdens of Disease. Epidemics and Human Response in Western History*, 130, 139–40.

⁵³ See the essays in Mack, “In Times of Plague,” esp. Poirier, “AIDS and Traditions of Homophobia,” 461–75, and Richards, “Human Rights, Public Health, and the Idea of a Moral Plague,” 491–528; Rosenberg, “What is an Epidemic?,” 1–17; Ron and Rogers, “AIDS in the United States,” 41–58; Hays, *Burdens of Disease*, 301–6.

world and across multiple faiths during the present Coronavirus pandemic.⁵⁴ The global reach of such reports demonstrates that this is a key issue that cannot be ignored and requires a concerted response from all levels of society—as has indeed been urged in recent statements by international organizations such as UNICEF, Religions for Peace, and the United Nations Secretary General.⁵⁵ While the impact of COVID-19 continues to unfold around the world, what cannot be doubted is the role religion continues to play in shaping human perceptions of and responses to the traumatic experience of rapidly escalating global infection and mass mortality. To cite the apposite observations of the authors of a recent editorial on religion and COVID-19, across the spectrum of all possible reactions, whether negative or positive, harmful or helpful, it remains the case that “religious community-making tends to be an *intensifier of response*, strengthening resolve and motivating action....Human beings are complex and the way religion weaves itself through the lattice of human life is incredibly intricate.”⁵⁶ In sum, religion cannot be ignored in any attempt to understand past, present, and future encounters with epidemic disease.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Amundsen, Darrel. *Medicine, Society and Faith in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- Arnold, David, ed. *Imperial Medicine and Indigenous Societies*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988.
- . “Introduction: Disease, Medicine and Empire.” In Arnold, *Imperial Medicine*, 1–26.
- . “Smallpox and Colonial Medicine in Nineteenth-Century India.” In Arnold, *Imperial Medicine*, 45–65.
- . *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

⁵⁴ “Israeli Rabbi: Coronavirus Outbreak is Divine Punishment”; Wildman et al., “Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic”; Ellis-Petersen and Rahman, “Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories Targeting Muslims”; Mirza, “COVID-19 Fans Religious Discrimination in Pakistan”; Dein et al., “COVID-19, Mental Health and Religion,” 5–6; Sarkar, “Religious Discrimination is Hindering the Covid Response”; Ghosh, “Modi’s Covid-19 Policies”; “Religious Inequalities and the Impact of Covid-19.”

⁵⁵ “Launch of Global Multi-Religion Faith-in-Action Covid-19 Initiative”; “UNICEF and Faith Groups Release New Guidance”; “Religious Hate Crimes, Racist Discourse Rising amid COVID-19.”

⁵⁶ Wildman et al., “Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic,” 116.

- Baruch, J. Z. "The Relation between Sin and Disease in the Old Testament." *Janus* 51 (1964): 295–302.
- Benedict, Carol. *Bubonic Plague in Nineteenth-Century China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.
- Birnbaum, Raoul. *The Healing Buddha*. Boulder: Shambhala, 1979.
- Black, Jeremy, Graham Cunningham, Eleanor Robson, and Gábor Zólyomi, trans. *The Literature of Ancient Sumer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Bray, R. S. *Armies of Pestilence. The Effects of Pandemics on History*. Cambridge: Lutterworth, 1996.
- Chaplin, Joyce E. *Subject Matter: Technology, the Body, and Science on the Anglo-Indian Frontier, 1500–1676*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Cipolla, Carlo M. *Faith, Reason and the Plague in Seventeenth-Century Tuscany*. Translated by M. Kittel. London: Norton, 1979.
- Conrad, Lawrence, and Dominik Wujastyk, eds. *Contagion. Perspectives from Pre-Modern Societies*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000.
- "Coronavirus: Scaled Back Hajj Pilgrimage Begins in Saudi Arabia." *BBC News*. July 29, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-53571886>.
- Crawshaw, Jane Stevens. *Plague Hospitals: Public Health for the City in Early Modern Venice*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012.
- Crosby, Alfred W. *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Cyprian. *Thasci Caecili Cypriani De Mortalitate*. Translated by Mary Louise Hannan. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1933.
- Dein, Simon, Kate Loewenthal, Christopher Alan Lewis, and Kenneth Pargament. "COVID-19, Mental Health and Religion: An Agenda for Future Research." *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 23, no. 1 (2020): 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2020.1768725>.
- Dols, Michael. *The Black Death in the Middle East*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977.
- Ellis-Petersen, Hannah, and Shaikh Azizur Rahman. "Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories Targeting Muslims Spread in India." *The Guardian*. April 13, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/13/coronavirus-conspiracy-theories-targeting-muslims-spread-in-india>.
- Eusebius. *Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 2, Books 6–10. Translated by Roy J. Deferrari. The Fathers of the Church, 29. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1955.
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E. *Nuer Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956.
- Ghosh, Jayati. "Modi's Covid-19 Policies Make Clear that in India Some Lives Matter More Than Others." *The Guardian*. July 29, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jul/29/modis-covid-19-policies-make-clear-that-in-india-some-lives-matter-more-than-others>.

- Gregory of Tours. *The History of the Franks*. Translated by O. M. Dalton. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927.
- Hanson, Kenneth. "When the King Crosses the Line: Royal Deviance and Restitution in Levantine Ideologies." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 26 (1996): 11–25.
- Hays, J. N. *The Burdens of Disease. Epidemics and Human Response in Western History*. 2nd ed. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009.
- Heeßel, Nils P. "The Hands of the Gods: Disease Names, and Divine Anger." In *Disease in Babylonia*, edited by Irving L. Finkel and Markham G. Geller, 120–30. Leiden: Brill, 2007.
- "Israeli Rabbi: Coronavirus Outbreak is Divine Punishment for Gay Pride Parades." *The Times of Israel*. March 8, 2020. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-rabbi-blames-coronavirus-outbreak-on-gay-pride-parades/>
- Kee, Howard. *Medicine, Miracle and Magic in New Testament Times*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Kuriyama, Shigehisa. "Epidemics, Weather and Contagion in Traditional Chinese Medicine." In Conrad and Wujastyk, *Contagion*, 3–22.
- "Launch of Global Multi-Religion Faith-in-Action Covid-19 Initiative. Faith and Positive Change for Children, Families and Communities." Joint Statement issued by UNICEF and Religions for Peace. April 7, 2020. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/launch-global-multi-religious-faith-action-covid-19-initiative>.
- Mack, Arien, ed. "In Time of Plague: The History and Social Consequences of Lethal Epidemic Disease." Special issue, *Social Research* 55, no. 3 (Autumn 1988).
- Marshall, Katherine. "What Religion Can Offer in the Response to COVID-19." *World Politics Review*. May 26, 2020. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/insights/28789/religion-and-covid-19-faith-during-a-pandemic>
- Marshall, Louise. "Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy." *Renaissance Quarterly* 47 (1994): 485–532.
- . "La costruzione di un santo contro la peste: il caso di Nicola da Tolentino." In *San Nicola da Tolentino nell'arte. Corpus iconografico*, edited by Valentino Pace and Roberto Tollo. Vol. 1, *Dalle origini al Concilio di Trento*, 103–13. Milan: Motta, 2005.
- . "Plague Literature and Art, Early Modern European." In *Encyclopedia of Pestilence, Pandemics and Plagues*, edited by Joseph P. Byrne. Vol. 2, 522–30. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 2008.
- . "A New Plague Saint for Renaissance Italy: Suffering and Sanctity in Narrative Cycles of Saint Roch." In *Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration, Convergence. Acts of the 32nd Congress of the International Committee of the History of Art*, edited by Jaynie Anderson, 543–49. Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, Melbourne University, 2009.
- . "A Plague Saint for Venice: Tintoretto at the Chiesa di San Rocco." *Artibus et Historiae* 66 (2012): 153–88.

- . “The Collaboration from Hell: A Plague Strike Force in S. Pietro in Vincoli, Rome.” In *Religion, the Supernatural and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe: An Album Amicorum for Charles Zika*, edited by Jennifer Spinks and Dagmar Eichberger, 19–45. Leiden: Brill, 2015.
- . “God’s Executioners: Angels, Devils and the Plague in Giovanni Sercambi’s Illustrated Chronicle.” In *Disaster, Death and the Emotions in the Shadow of the Apocalypse, 1400–1700*, edited by Jennifer Spinks and Charles Zika, 177–99. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- . “Affected Bodies and Bodily Affect: Visualising Emotion in Renaissance Plague Images.” In *Performing Emotions in Early Europe*, edited by Philippa Maddern, Joanne McEwan, and Ann M. Scott, 73–106. Turnhout: Brepols, 2018.
- . “St. Roch and the Angel in Renaissance Art.” *Studies in Iconography* 41 (2020): 165–211.
- “Muslims Begin Down-sized Hajj Pilgrimage Amid Coronavirus Pandemic.” *Al Jazeera*. July 29, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/7/29/muslims-begin-downsized-hajj-pilgrimage-amid-coronavirus-pandemic>.
- Mirza, Jaffer Abbas. “COVID-19 Fans Religious Discrimination in Pakistan.” *The Diplomat*. April 28, 2020. <https://thedi diplomat.com/2020/04/covid-19-fans-religious-discrimination-in-pakistan/>.
- Nelkin, Dorothy, and Sander L. Gilman. “Placing Blame for Devastating Disease.” In Mack, “In Time of Plague,” 362–78.
- Nicholas, Ralph W. “The Goddess Sitala and Epidemic Smallpox in Bengal.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 41, no. 1 (1981): 21–44.
- Ohnuki-Tierney, Emiko. “Healing and Medicine: Healing and Medicine in Japan.” In *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. 2nd ed., edited by Lindsay Jones. Vol. 6, 3867–70. Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2005.
- Palmer, Richard. “The Church, Leprosy and Plague in Medieval and Early Modern Europe.” *Studies in Church History* 19 (1982): 79–99.
- Perry, Samuel L., Andrew L. Whitehead, and Joshua B. Grubbs. “Culture Wars and COVID-19 Conduct: Christian Nationalism, Religiosity, and Americans’ Behavior During the Coronavirus Pandemic.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 59, no. 3 (July): 405–16. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12677>.
- Poirier, Richard. “AIDS and Traditions of Homophobia.” In Mack, “In Time of Plague,” 461–75.
- “Religious Hate Crimes, Racist Discourse Rising amid COVID-19, Secretary-General Warns in Observance Message, Urging Greater Inclusion, Respect for Diversity.” Press Release, United Nations Secretary General Statements and Messages. August 20, 2020. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm20214.doc.htm>.
- “Religious Inequalities and the Impact of Covid-19.” Institute for Development Studies. September 27, 2020. <https://www.ids.ac.uk/news/religious-inequalities-and-the-impact-of-covid-19/>.

- Ron, Aran, and David E. Rogers. "AIDS in the United States: Patient Care and Politics." *Daedalus* 118 (1989): 41–58.
- Rosenberg, Charles E. "What is an Epidemic? AIDS in Historical Perspective." *Daedalus* 118 (1989): 1–17.
- Richards, David A. J. "Human Rights, Public Health, and the Idea of a Moral Plague." In Mack, "In Time of Plague," 491–528.
- Sarkar, Sonia. "Religious Discrimination is Hindering the Covid-19 Response." *BMJ* (June 2020). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m2280>.
- Scourfield, J. H. D. "The *De Mortalitate* of Cyprian: Consolation and Context." *Vigiliae Christianae* 50 (1996): 12–41.
- Selin, Helaine, and Hugh Shapiro, eds. *Medicine Across Cultures. History and Practice of Medicine in Non-Western Cultures*. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2003.
- Singer, Itamar. *Hittite Prayers*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002.
- Slack, Paul. "Responses to Plague in Early Modern Europe: The Implications of Public Health." In Mack, "In Time of Plague," 433–53.
- Suzuki, Yui. *Medicine Master Buddha: The Iconic Worship of Yakushi in Heian Japan*. Leiden: Brill, 2012.
- "UNICEF and Faith Groups Release New Guidance on How to Support Communities in Times of COVID-19." Press release, UNICEF. July 30, 2020. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-and-faith-groups-release-new-guidance-how-support-communities-times-covid-19>.
- Watts, Sheldon. *Disease and Medicine in World History*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Westerlund, David. *African Indigenous Religions and Disease Causation. From Spiritual Beings to Living Humans*. Leiden: Brill, 2006.
- Wiggermann, F. A. M. "Nergal." In *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie*, edited by A. Bramanti, Erich Ebeling, and Michael P. Streck. Vol. 9, 215–26. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998.
- Wildman, Wesley J., Joseph Bulbulia, Richard Sosis, and Uffe Schjoedt. "Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 10, no. 2 (April 2020): 115–17. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2153599x.2020.1749339>.
- Wilson, Jason. "The Rightwing Christian Preachers in Deep Denial over Covid-19's Danger." *The Guardian*. April 4, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/04/america-rightwing-christian-preachers-virus-hoax>.
- Ziegler, Philip. *The Black Death*. New York: Harper and Row, 1969.
- Zysk, Kenneth G. *Asceticism and Healing in Ancient India. Medicine in the Buddhist Monastery*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- . "Does Ancient Indian Medicine Have a Theory of Contagion?." In Conrad and Wujastyk, *Contagion*, 79–96.

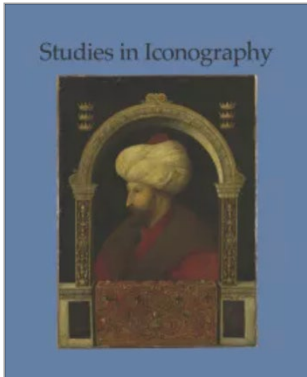
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Louise Marshall is an Honorary Senior Lecturer at the University of Sydney, Australia, where she taught medieval and Renaissance art for many years. Her primary field of research is Italian Renaissance plague images, on which she has published extensively and is preparing a book. Other research interests include late medieval and Renaissance devotional imagery, the history of emotions, and early representations of purgatory. Her research has been supported by the University of Sydney; the Vittorio Branca International Center for the Study of Italian Culture at the Fondazione Cini, Venice; the Australian Research Council Centre for the History of Emotions; the Renaissance Society of America; and the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation, UK.

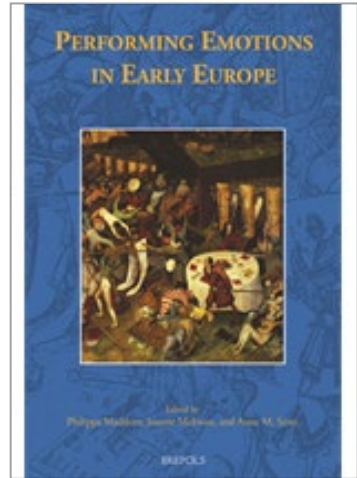
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This is a revised and expanded version of an essay first published as “Religion and Epidemic Disease,” in *Encyclopedia of Pestilence, Pandemics and Plagues*, ed. Joseph P. Byrne (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 2008), 2:593–600; republished with permission of ABC-CLIO, LLC, conveyed through the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.

MORE FROM THE AUTHOR



“St Roch and the Angel in Renaissance Art,”
Studies in Iconography 41
(2020): 165-211



“Affected Bodies and Bodily Affect: Visualising Emotion in Renaissance Plague Images,”
in *Performing Emotions in Early Europe*, Brepols, 2018

